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ZHOU ENLAI - VIRTUOSO PERFORMANCE

CORE COURSE 1 ESSAY

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Zhou Enlai - Virtuoso Performance

Introduction President Richard Nixon's journey to China in 1972 to sign an accord known as the Shanghai communiqué marked the end of 20 years of diplomatic isolation between China and the U S Nixon, Kissinger and others have acknowledged Zhou Enlai's masterful orchestration of the developments that led to that historic event The following is an analysis of Zhou's statecraft It looks at what Zhou wanted to achieve in bringing about a rapprochement with the U S , the constraints he had to deal with at home and abroad, and the strategies he used to reach his goals

Background Setting: By the time Nixon reached Beijing, Kissinger had already visited China several times and had developed good rapport with Zhou From their memoirs it is clear that both Nixon and Kissinger, strong exponents of power politics, thought they had recognized a kindred soul in the Chinese Premier They clearly felt comfortable dealing with him Kissinger described him as "one of the two or three most impressive men" he had ever met, and said Zhou "was equally at home in philosophy, reminiscence, historical analysis, tactical probes, and humorous repartee "¹ But, what was actually going on behind Zhou's friendly smile? An analysis of Zhou's thought processes requires an understanding of the cultural and historical forces that shaped his strategic analysis and negotiating style

Zhou was from a Mandarin family, graduated from Nankai University, and had studied abroad In his youth, Zhou used to perform the principal female roles in Beijing Opera (all parts used to be performed by men and required a tremendous physical and mental discipline,

especially the female roles)² That Zhou was an amateur thespian is especially significant in that it revealed an early talent to play difficult roles in a convincing and subtle manner Later in life, Zhou's role playing abilities would repeatedly serve him well in convincing his foreign interlocutors as well as domestic detractors of his sincerity

Unfolding Drama As an opera aficionado, Zhou undoubtedly appreciated the real-life drama he helped stage with Kissinger's assistance If we were to analyze the rapprochement in theatrical terms, the opening scene would have two countries estranged for almost two decades moving cautiously towards each other Each nation had given various signals that it was ready for a potentially dramatic change in their relationship In 1971, for instance, there had been China's invitation to the U S pingpong team, that same year, America supported China's entry into the United Nations The timing looked promising, but the atmosphere was filled with uncertainty Each side suspiciously eyed the other's motives Mao was still in nominal command of his country, but Zhou had been the maestro of Chinese foreign policy since the Communists took power in 1949, and was manager of China's daily affairs of state It was, therefore, Zhou's responsibility to direct the action without a set script, the actors would improvise and determine the final outcome of this opera At stage center was a China that proclaimed itself the true ideological leader of the Communist world, and yet was militarily and economically weak It had suffered serious blows caused not only by diplomatic isolation, but also by a decade of Cultural Revolutionary excesses It was encircled by the stronger Soviet Union to its north, the Soviet proxy India menacing its flank, the former foe Japan to its east, and a number of unreliable border states like Vietnam to its south Waiting for the right cues was

an America whose dialogue would dramatically alter the plot

Characters From the Past During Nixon's visit, he had a chance to meet Mao's wife during one of her productions of a "modern Chinese opera" Jiang Qing bore sole responsibility for destroying traditional Beijing Opera during the Cultural Revolution, an artform she considered decadent Perhaps this was another reason why she and Zhou did not get along Among the most popular characters of traditional Chinese theater are those based on the semi-fictional classic "Romance of the Three Kingdoms" Zhou, of course, was extremely familiar with this epic drama, which was set during a turbulent period of the Han dynasty It tells of intricate plots and of how princes, warriors and court advisors used various the tools of statecraft to gain supremacy The heroes of the tale are among Chinese literature's most noble and best loved characters Mao once told Edgar Snow that he and his classmates enjoyed the stories so much when they were young that they learned many of them almost by heart³ Not the least of these lessons was the need to cultivate strategic alliances with those far away and less threatening to isolate enemies closer at hand

Supporting Actors: Fortunately for Zhou, these same lessons were not lost on the broad masses of Chinese, the Three Kingdoms and its heros have been part of Chinese folklore for centuries Thus, it did not require a major psychological shift for the Chinese to substitute the old names of the three kingdoms with new ones America, China, and the Soviet Union Moreover, having been bombarded by propaganda about Soviet betrayal since the early 1960's, the man-on-the-street in China was well aware his Northern neighbors posed the more

immediate threat than the Americans did. Therefore, when Nixon finally arrived on their doorstep, the Chinese were probably less surprised than some Americans by this quick turn of events. Even in a totalitarian society, obtaining broad domestic support for this new initiative with the American "barbarian" was vital to the implementation of Zhou's strategy. Backstage intrigue by hardliners was constantly threatening his political position. Specifically, he had to fend off Jiang Qing and her cohorts (later labeled the "Gang-of-Four") in a behind-the-scenes maneuver for power. Zhou himself had been a target of various Maoist factions during the Cultural Revolution, and he could not be sure those he had placed in key positions (e.g., Deng Xiaoping) could counter the so-called Gang-of-Four.

Voices in Harmony The Chinese believe that harmony is created by a balance of Yin and Yang forces (in metaphysical terms, opposite poles of the same universe, e.g., light and dark, sun and moon, good and evil). Therefore, despite objections from the Gang-of-Four, Zhou probably had little difficulty gaining Mao's blessing to pursue his objective in creating a balance of power. According to Kissinger, "Equilibrium was the name of the game. We did not seek to join China in a provocative confrontation with the Soviet Union. But we agreed on the necessity to curb Moscow's geopolitical ambitions."⁴ At the outset, neutralizing the Soviet threat was clearly a top priority for both Mao and Zhou. This became even more transparent not long after resuming a state-to-state dialogue. Chinese officials, for example, exhorted their American counterparts to strengthen NATO and to not let U.S. relations with Japan deteriorate. These exhortations reflected not only their desire to contain Soviet hegemony. They also showed Chinese concern that the U.S. would disengage too quickly from Asia in the aftermath.

of the Vietnam quagmire, and thus precipitate a revival of Japanese militarism Zhou knew these ideas would strike a responsive chord with the American president

On the issue of Taiwan, which had always been a pre-condition for the normalization of Sino-U S relations, Zhou "agreed to disagree" Why was he willing to make it a subject of future negotiation when it had been such a bone of contention before? He was probably merely reminding himself of the old Chinese adage "Tan xiao shi da," which cautions against losing a big win by seeking a small gain In Zhou's eyes, the big win was the neutralization of an external threat so that he could focus on other priorities (e g , rebuilding a nation that had been in emotional and economic limbo for over ten years) Taiwan was important, but could wait

Hitting the High Notes: This is' not to imply the Chinese easily forego principle for expediency As John Fairbanks observed, it took an additional seven years after Nixon's trip to establish formal diplomatic relations - a tribute to the wide cultural gap between the our two countries³ The Chinese, at least on the surface, seemed to take their ideology seriously After all, the Sino-Soviet split was exacerbated by visceral disagreements over which nation was being faithful to Communist ideals, with the Chinese leadership claiming to be the only true followers of Marxist-Leninist ideology This was significant because, at the time, China was disclaiming "superpower" status and sought to align itself with the "Third World" to counter the U S and Soviet Union

In his book on Zhou's diplomatic style, Keith makes the case that "ideology was not merely a facade" and states that "Zhou's realism was a matter of formal ideological conception which drew on the practical experience of united front politics"⁶ Whether it was developing a

"united front" with Chiang Kai Shek's Kuomintang against the Japanese during WWII, or in reaching an accommodation with Nixon to neutralize Soviet power, Chinese national strategy seemed to be relatively consistent despite changing external and internal conditions. Call it realism, idealism or pragmatism, the important point is that Zhou did an expert job in spotlighting those Chinese interests that converged with Nixon's and keeping in the shadows those that did not. Kissinger concluded that "it was on this level of shared geopolitical interest transcending philosophies and history that the former Red-baiter and the crusaders for world revolution found each other."⁷

Using the Right Props: Zhou relied principally on his ability to persuade his American interlocutors that the benefits of rapprochement outweighed the risks of continued confrontation. According to Holsti, individuals and groups can influence each other using various forms of (a) *persuasion* (diplomacy), (b) *rewards* (economic), (c) *non-violent punishment* (such as boycotts, breaking diplomatic relations), and (d) *military force*.⁸

While diplomacy was Zhou's primary instrument, some of the other tools on Holsti's list were also at his disposal. Whether or not they were ever explicitly stated, it must have been apparent to Nixon and Kissinger that the Chinese could employ a variety of incentives or disincentives to influence the outcome of future events. Hypothetically, a few of the options available to Zhou included rewards to the U.S. in the form of lucrative trade opportunities, non-violent punishment via increased Chinese pressure and propaganda to turn world opinion against U.S. initiatives in Southeast Asia, and direct and indirect military intervention in future scenarios to counter U.S. efforts in the region.

Shared Lines To present a more graphic picture of why Zhou was able to get the actors to set aside differences and focus primarily on mutually shared interests, we could summarize and array some of the factors discussed above using Nuechterlein's "national interest matrix."⁹ Nuechterlein defines national interests as a country's perceived needs and aspirations in relation to other states. He lists four categories, along with a hierarchy of intensity (ranging from survival to peripheral) for each. The matrix is helpful in calculating whether a specific issue is likely to be negotiable or whether it might lead to conflict.

<u>Intensity of Interest</u>				
<i>Interest at Stake</i>	<i>Survival</i>	<i>Vital</i>	<i>Major</i>	<i>Peripheral</i>
Defense of Homeland	China	U S		
Economic Well Being			China	U S
Favorable World Order			U S	China
Promotion of Values			China	U S

(1) *Defense of Homeland* The overriding priority for both countries was defense. For China it was survival, for the U S it was deterrence. Both wanted assurances that one would not gang up with the Soviets against the other.

(2) *Economic Well-Being* This was a major concern for China, which realized it could not rebuild its economy by remaining isolated; better U S relations would provide access to western technology and know-how. While economics were peripheral to Nixon's calculations during his discussions with the Chinese, military expenditures for deterrence and Vietnam were

an economic drain, hence, reduction in tensions with China would allow the U S to reallocate resources The lure of a potentially hugh market for American goods was also attractive to the U S

(3) *Favorable World Order* Both were concerned with achieving a balance of power to maintain stability and saw a triangular relationship as a means toward that end The U S had greater global interests at stake, China's interests were closer to home and more regional

(4) *Promotion of Values* Although each country held diametrically opposed political values, ideology was of peripheral interest during initial talks and took a back seat to more immediate concerns of military security

Encore: To say that the Sino-U S rapprochement profoundly changed subsequent events in the region and beyond is an understatement For example, confirmation from the Chinese that they had irreconcilable differences with the Soviet Union was reassuring to our national security establishment, and added to our self-confidence in dealing with both the Chinese and the Soviets It also increased our options in and around Asia both during and after the Vietnam war For instance, while publicly not playing the China card against the Soviets, the U S privately encouraged Chinese assistance to the Afghan rebels to help dislodge the Soviet propped regime in Kabul It also increased Chinese options as well For example, China sought our tacit approval to "teach Vietnam a lesson" when its troops went into Vietnam in the 1980's When the Vietnamese went into Cambodia in the 1970's, the U S backed the non-communist resistance and the Chinese backed the Khmer Rouge to fight the "Vietnamese puppet regime "

Moscow did not stand idly by while all this was going on. Seriously worried about Sino-American collusion at their expense, the Soviets sought to keep the Chinese from getting too complacent by signing a friendship treaty with India, and by trying to mend relations with the U.S.

Critic's Review: Zhou undoubtedly deserved most of the accolades Kissinger and others lavished on him. It was indeed a virtuoso performance. But how well did he actually achieve his long term goals? For an assessment, one might review the accomplishments of his hand picked successor, Deng Xiao Ping. Aside from leading China along a road of phenomenal economic growth, Deng has maintained continuity in most of the foreign policy objectives initiated by Zhou (territorial integrity, universal recognition that Beijing and not Taipei represented the Chinese people, and enhancement of its international status and economic well-being). Because most Chinese credit Zhou for making all of that possible, they regard him as one of the few unblemished heroes of modern China.¹⁰ In short, Zhao's legacy as a master statesman endures.

It has been 24 years since Nixon's trip to China. Following a brief honeymoon period, our relationship with China has matured during this interval. Not unlike many marriages of convenience, it has sometimes been warm, but often cold and distant. It has sometimes even verged on the precipice of divorce. Differences over human rights and political values, especially in the aftermath of Tiananmen, as well as frictions over trade will not be easily reconciled. In view of Zhou's role in bringing about this match-up, what would he suggest today to steer the future course of our bilateral relationship? If past practice is any indication, he

Lee 10

might counsel Clinton to avoid "losing a big win to seek small gains - Tan xiao shi da" Zhou would probably say that the U S and China have too much at stake to let present tensions jeopardize our more important longer term and mutually compatible interests

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